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on Wednesday, 17 July 1996, at 3 p.m.

President: Mr. GERVAIS (Côte d'Ivoire)

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The meeting was called to order at 3 p.m.

ECONOMIC AND ENVIRONMENTAL QUESTIONS: REPORTS OF SUBSIDIARY BODIES, CONFERENCES AND RELATED QUESTIONS (continued)

(h) INTERNATIONAL DECADE FOR NATURAL DISASTER REDUCTION (A/51/186-E/1996/80) (continued)

The PRESIDENT invited the Council to resume its consideration of item 6 (h) entitled "International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction".

Mr. PANKIN (Russian Federation) expressed his delegation's satisfaction with the Secretary-General's report on the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction. He called for broader access for all countries to technological means of disseminating disaster reduction experience and practices, and for them to be integrated into a worldwide early-warning system through an international convention on the use of communications for disaster relief. The Russian Federation was also supporting efforts to expand the involvement of players outside the United Nations in disaster relief, such as banks, insurance companies and private businesses.

The groups working in the context of the Decade to enhance disaster relief and mitigation worldwide had made satisfactory progress to date. However, the closing event of the Decade was of great importance, as it would define the direction of future efforts to coordinate and stimulate disaster relief cooperation. The Russian Federation had been actively involved in all aspects of the Decade, and looked forward to a productive and cost-effective closing event.

Ms. LOW (United States of America) said that her delegation fully supported the goals of the Decade and the need to integrate disaster reduction measures into sustainable development programmes. It strongly believed that progress to date in natural disaster reduction should be consolidated and linked with economic and social development and environmental protection. Activities like the Disaster Management Training Programme were critical and cost-effective and should continue to be assigned top priority.

While progress to date had been inconsistent, the United States viewed the overall growth in the number and diversity of initiatives inside and outside the

United Nations as a positive development. Her delegation strongly urged the Decade secretariat to continue to emphasize coordination of its programmes within the United Nations system, especially the coordination and integration of disaster relief programmes into United Nations Development Programme country strategies. The United Nations should also ensure that the Decade closing event should focus on integrating disaster reduction into national planning and reviewing specific natural disaster reduction outcomes achieved during the Decade.

Mr. LI Tianwu (China) called for a thorough review of the accomplishments of the Decade in order to ensure the timely achievement of its objectives. He also called for strengthened international cooperation on natural disaster reduction, enhanced awareness of the relationship between natural disaster reduction and sustainable development, and the integration of natural disaster reduction programmes into national development planning.

The developed countries should provide developing countries with the funds and technical assistance needed to strengthen natural disaster reduction capacity and achieve sustainable development. The Yokohama Strategy and Plan of Action should be implemented comprehensively, and the Decade trust fund should be used primarily for natural disaster reduction in developing countries.

Ms. McNISH (Jamaica) said that her delegation associated itself with the statement made on behalf of the Group of 77 and China. It expressed sympathy to the victims of recent natural disasters.

Agenda item 6 (h) was of particular interest to Jamaica and other Caribbean countries, because the extreme vulnerability of small island developing countries to natural disasters had become a major obstacle to sustained economic and social development. The impact of natural disasters was far greater in poorer countries than in industrialized countries, and recovery was much slower. Jamaica was therefore convinced of the need to integrate natural disaster reduction into the sustainable development process.

It was important to accord priority to the strengthening of national and regional activities and mechanisms with a view to increasing the capabilities of disaster-prone countries in preparedness, mitigation, response and recovery. The Declaration and Programme of Action for the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States provided a comprehensive blueprint for such action. Strong commitment and support at the international level and by the United

Nations humanitarian assistance agencies were indispensable for the successful implementation of the Declaration.

Her delegation believed that the proposals relating to natural disaster mitigation set out in the report on the fourth session of the Commission on Sustainable Development (E/1996/28) should be included in the international strategies for the Decade. It noted the Commission's call for an effective synergy between the implementation of Agenda 21, the Programme of Action for the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States and the Yokohama Strategy and Plan of Action (decision 4/16, para. 15 (c)). To ensure effective and long-term solutions, international humanitarian policies must also emphasize rehabilitation and development; the post-disaster development phase was of critical importance.

Her delegation commended the Decade secretariat for its work in achieving the goals of the Decade and urged continued and additional funding commitments to support that work. It endorsed the proposed framework for the closing event of the Decade.

Strategies and activities developed during the Decade must be sustained beyond the Decade. Institutional arrangements, mechanisms and procedures as well as technical and financial support must be continued. The suggestions set forth in the report for future forms of organization should be carefully considered.

Mr. TALBOT (Guyana) said that the statement of the representative of Costa Rica on behalf of the Group of 77 and China fully reflected his delegation's concerns. He also expressed his delegation's deep appreciation of the prompt and efficient cooperation provided to Guyana by the United Nations, its Department of Humanitarian Affairs and the international donors during recent natural disasters.

Mr. MURAOKA (Japan) noted with satisfaction the initiatives at the national, subregional and regional levels that had taken place during the Decade. Japan recognized the importance of countries' sharing natural disaster experiences, especially since the Hanshin-Awaji earthquake of 1995, and was considering support for the Decade secretariat's global project for disaster-resistant urbanization and seismic risk assessment in urban areas (RADIUS).

Japan called upon the Decade secretariat to ensure that the closing event of the Decade was as practical as possible, supported the Secretary-General's

call to fully integrate the Yokohama Strategy and Plan of Action into the implementation of the action plans of all recent United Nations conferences, and requested clarification of how such integration was to be achieved. He also inquired how coordinated institutional measures were to be maintained beyond the Decade under the International Framework of Action and how the concept and objectives of the Decade could be coordinated with activities of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

Ms. SIBAL (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)) said that UNESCO continued to contribute to the activities of the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction. In implementation of the Yokohama Strategy and Plan of Action, UNESCO had accelerated and further expanded its programme related to natural hazards, which currently focused on improved understanding of risks, hazard mapping, monitoring of earthquakes and volcanoes, floods and tsunamis and on technical, educational and information measures for risk mitigation. The programme also sought to integrate disaster reduction into environmental and developmental concerns.

UNESCO continued to cooperate with the national focal points and committees for the Decade and was working closely with the secretariat of the Decade in the design and implementation of joint projects. It was concerned about the insufficient support given to the Decade within the United Nations system. It had always considered that prevention was the only cost-effective way to deal with potential disasters, and it believed that the world community must take a long-term view and be proactive rather than reactive.

UNESCO strongly endorsed the statement that had resulted from the seventh session of the Scientific and Technical Committee; it continued to view the strengthening of capacity-building for vulnerability reduction and disaster prevention as a distinct fundamental activity towards sustainable development. It appealed for a distinct identity and autonomy for the organizational arrangements for the Decade. It also felt that the secretariat of the Decade should be strengthened. It had offered to host the forthcoming session of the Scientific and Technical Committee and hoped that on that occasion there would be a serious consideration of ways and means of pursuing the objectives of the Decade for the remainder of its term and beyond.

Mrs. REBONG (Philippines) said that her delegation fully associated itself with the statement of the representative of Costa Rica on behalf of the

Group of 77 and China. It stressed the importance of the linkage between natural disaster reduction and sustainable development. The Yokohama Strategy and Plan of Action should be fully integrated into the concerted approach towards the implementation of the action plans of all recent global United Nations conferences, and natural disaster reduction should be considered as a cross-cutting issue in the evaluation of Agenda 21.

Her delegation also strongly supported the pursuit of an effective overall natural disaster reduction strategy beyond the Decade, and it requested that future reports on natural disaster reduction should include information on the activities of relevant specialized agencies.

Mr. ELO (Director, International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction), responding to questions raised by delegations, said that the secretariat of the Decade took part in the development of programmes concerning natural and environmental disasters within the framework of the Commission for Sustainable Development. The issue of integrating the Yokohama Plan of Action into the outcomes of recent international conferences was being discussed with the Department for Policy Coordination and Sustainable Development, while the concerns relating to the activities of UNHCR were being channelled through the Department of Humanitarian Affairs. Finally, his office was working to establish a sustainable and solid basis for protecting development programmes from the adverse effects of natural disasters through the strategies and programmes established for the Decade.

The PRESIDENT suggested that the Council should take note of the report of the Secretary-General (A/51/186-E/1996/80).

It was so decided.

REGIONAL COOPERATION IN THE ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND RELATED FIELDS (E/1996/45 and Add.1, E/1996/46-50; E/1996/NGO/4)

Mr. MOOY (Executive Secretary, Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP)), introducing the report of the Secretary-General on regional cooperation in the economic, social and related fields (E/1996/45 and Add.1), said that the main document dealt with various substantive issues, while the addendum was concerned with matters requiring action by the Council or its attention following the regular sessions of the regional commissions. The Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), which held its sessions on a biennial basis, had not met in 1996. He drew attention to the economic and

social surveys of the respective regions prepared by the regional commissions, and to their annual reports.

The report of the Secretary-General described the follow-up activities of the commissions in pursuance of the relevant decisions and recommendations of global conferences. The commissions had major responsibility at the regional level for the preparation of regional plans and programmes of action and remained very active in the follow-up to and implementation of the commitments made as a result of those conferences. The report also described the growing relationship of the regional commissions with the relevant subregional organizations and other organizations, both within the United Nations and outside.

Because of their proximity and ability to render cost-effective services, the regional commissions were able to maintain regular contact with their membership. They were therefore well aware of the often profound changes that were taking place in the economic and social structures of member countries and the need to adapt their work to changing needs and emerging development challenges, in partnership with those countries. An account of the reform process was provided in section III of the report. The regional commissions would welcome guidance on the relevant issues arising from General Assembly resolution 50/227.

The Committee for Programme and Coordination, at its thirty-sixth session, had called for increased interregional cooperation. The regional commissions fully shared that objective and for years had been seeking to develop such cooperation; some projects had been endorsed by the Council itself but had not been implemented because of lack of funds. While bilateral donors were usually available to fund regional projects, they were not so readily forthcoming to support interregional projects. Efforts to secure funds from the funding organizations of the United Nations had not produced the desired results. The regional commissions had submitted several proposals and project ideas for interregional cooperation in the report.

Mr. AMOAKO (Economic Commission for Africa (ECA)) introducing document E/1996/47, said that the continuing recovery in output and performance in the ECA region was encouraging. In 1995, the African economy had experienced its highest annual growth rate since the beginning of the decade. In more than half of the countries of the region, increases in gross domestic product exceeded

population growth. While several countries remained at the lower end of the growth spectrum, the overall turnabout was a vindication of the economic reforms and sound policies which most of the countries were pursuing.

Several critical development issues, however, continued to be of major concern to the region. Africa's share in aggregate world trade and output remained far below its share of world population, and the decline of its share in the trade of developing countries had been even more dramatic. The food situation in some parts of Africa had been a serious cause for concern in 1995, despite good harvests in a number of countries. Until now, the region had not benefited from the surge in world investment flows. It was hoped that as more countries pursuing reform programmes showed signs of sound recovery, greater numbers of foreign investors would be attracted to Africa. Finally, external debt and debt-servicing obligations continued to pose a major threat to the financing of economic recovery and negatively affected the availability of resources.

The Commission's programme of work addressed issues such as poverty reduction through improved food security, financing of transport and communications, the integration of environment considerations into agricultural planning and policy strategies and improving public expenditure for rural development. The Commission continued to support follow-up activities and regional programmes, in particular the United Nations Second Transport and Communications Decade in Africa (1991-2000) and the United Nations Second Industrial Development Decade for Africa (1993-2002). The Secretariat had continued its cooperation with the Organization of African Unity in implementing the Abuja Treaty establishing the African economic community. Efforts in that regard were concentrated on the appropriation of the various protocols related to the treaty.

The reform initiated by the Commission during the last quarter of 1995 was on course. It was guided by three principles, namely, excellence, cost-effectiveness and partnerships, and had begun with a series of consultations at all levels, including with management and staff members. A meeting in January with high-level African experts from government, the private sector, academia and civil society had been followed by a meeting in April with representatives of United Nations agencies, bilateral donors and some international foundations. The Commission's new operational mode included fewer and better reports, reduced

meetings, new arrangements for networking in tackling Africa's development problems, increased interaction with member States, and the forging of strategic alliances with partners.

Mr. BERTHELOT (Economic Commission for Europe (ECE)), introducing document E/1996/46, said that growth in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, driven by domestic demand, had been particularly strong in 1995. Western Europe was now the main trading partner, accounting for 50 to 60 per cent of their trade. Inflation had continued to decline but was still in the double-digit range. The situation in Russia remained uncertain, although attempts to control price fluctuations had succeeded. During the first half of 1996 approximately half of the countries in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) had experienced positive growth rates, with production at a higher level than during the previous year. Their trade with Russia had increased, as had trade amongst themselves.

In Western Europe, growth forecasts were low, at 1.5 per cent for 1996. In response to weak economic growth, monetary policies in many Western European countries had been relaxed further in the early months of 1996. The progressive easing of monetary policy was reflected in the fall in short-term interest rates in most of Europe. Long-term interest rates had edged upward, influenced by capital markets in the United States. The 1.5 per cent growth rate could possibly drop to 1 per cent as a result of highly restrictive budgetary policies pursued by most countries in Western Europe.

With regard to reform in ECE, he said that in April 1995 the Commission had decided to reassess its working methods in order to enhance their effectiveness. To that end, it had sent a detailed questionnaire to all member States asking them to rate ECE programmes and activities. Having reviewed the responses to the questionnaires, the Commission had found a broad convergence of views among member States. In the months to come, it would finalize a plan of action which would define its role, streamline the intergovernmental machinery and identify programme elements on which to focus. The aims of the reform were to ensure a streamlined Commission, better able to respond to the needs of member States and to carry out its basic role of integrating all the countries of the region and harmonizing policies on the basis of common institutions and norms.

Mr. ROSENTHAL (Executive Secretary, Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC)) introducing document E/1996/49, said that

although the economic situation in Latin America and the Caribbean during the past year had been characterized by contradictory tendencies, the region had demonstrated vitality, a capacity to respond creatively to opportunities offered by the international context and intraregional cooperation, and an ability to face new challenges. Nevertheless, the rates of growth achieved were insufficient given the level of technological progress required and the need to overcome social problems.

Since July 1995, ECLAC had focused on stability and growth, savings and investment, productive restructuring, global competitiveness and public policies. It had continued to monitor economic and social trends and to expand a data bank containing the most complete and current information available on economic and social indicators in the region. ECLAC research activities had also continued, and the Commission had hosted many meetings of government officials and other individuals. It had adopted a regional plan on human settlements as part of the regional preparations for the United Nations Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat II).

The ECLAC secretariat had continued its operational activities, focusing on technical assistance and training, in some cases, in cooperation with the United Nations Development Programme. The thrust of the Commission's efforts in the Caribbean and Central American subregions had been to strengthen cooperation within the subregion and between it and the rest of the hemisphere. ECLAC had continued to support intraregional cooperation, both on its own and in collaboration with other institutions concerned with subregional integration. One analysis which had resulted from its cooperation with the Organization of American States and the Inter-American Development Bank had dealt with the situation small economies would face if a free-trade area comprising the entire hemisphere was established.

Lastly, he noted that one resolution adopted at the Commission's twenty-sixth session contained decisions aimed at increasing the efficiency, efficacy and relevance of the Commission and established a working group, open to all ECLAC member countries, which would define priorities for the Commission's work programme and recommend strategic directions for its future activities.

Mr. MOOY (Executive Secretary, Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP)), introducing document E/1996/48, said that ESCAP had

further consolidated its reputation as the most economically dynamic region in the world. Almost all countries had maintained their strong commitment to reform, restructuring, stabilization and the liberalization of their economies, and the expanding role of the private sector had been emphatically laid out in national policies with the ultimate objective of promoting investment, trade and economic growth.

Considerable progress had been achieved in the provision of social services throughout the region, although deficiencies persisted in many areas, notably, education and public health. Notwithstanding the progress made, more than one third of the population of the region's developing countries remained mired in poverty, which was a potential threat to social stability. The Commission had agreed on the need for a multi-pronged approach to tackling issues relating to rural poverty alleviation and sustainable development. It also had stressed the importance of a participatory approach to programme formulation and implementation entailing the mobilization of all social forces and the removal of constraints on the growth of the agricultural sector.

ESCAP had continued to play a role in fostering regional cooperation in order to enable progress to be equitably shared by all countries and had directed its secretariat to review and recommend measures for further strengthening such cooperation, steps which were crucial given the region's reliance on trade, investment and technology as the engines for growth and development. The Commission had decided to recommend that the Council should amend its terms of reference to include the Republic of Turkey as a regional member and to recommend membership status for the Republic of Palau, actions which would further enhance regional cooperation.

ESCAP had adopted 11 resolutions intended to promote social and economic development and cooperation in the region and had endorsed preparations for a conference to be held in India in October 1996, on policy measures to alleviate infrastructure bottlenecks in the region's developing countries.

Private capital flows in the region, which had more than doubled in the past decade, were concentrated primarily in the faster-growing economies, while many of the poorer countries relied almost entirely on development assistance for survival. The ESCAP secretariat had devoted greater attention during the past year to encouraging countries at different levels of development to share experience, know-how, growth and prosperity, with the aim of enhancing technical

cooperation and cooperation in trade and investment. At a time when financial resources were increasingly scarce, ESCAP planned to explore options for mobilizing third-party financial assistance, from bilateral or multilateral sources, as a means of financing development assistance programmes.

In the light of the financial crisis affecting the United Nations, ESCAP had been taking a close look at how it could continue to deliver its services - which were needed now more than ever before - as effectively as possible, and an assessment of its thematic programme structure was in progress.

Lastly, he noted that ESCAP was currently acting on recommendations for regional action to follow up the recent major international conferences.

Mr. EL-BEBLAWI (Executive Secretary, Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA)), introducing document E/1996/50, said that ESCWA had taken fully into consideration the fact that the political and economic situation in the region had continued to evolve rapidly and unpredictably since June 1995. Since the second half of 1995, economic developments and social trends had been influenced by such factors as the state of political relations among the countries of the region, the extent and nature of regional cooperation, general trends in the oil sector, economic sanctions against Iraq, the regional and national investment climates and the Middle East peace process.

He cited the information on overall economic performance in the region contained in paragraph 1 of document E/1996/50. Social problems continued to relate mainly to the inequality in income distribution, with resulting disparities in the level of living and the emergence of poverty pockets, a situation further aggravated by inadequate employment opportunities, high population growth, intensive rural to urban migration and poor educational opportunities. The cycle of poverty and unemployment threatened to destabilize social structures by creating marginalized groups which expressed frustration through violence and extremism.

In an ongoing effort to enhance regional cooperation, ESCWA committees had continued their work and ESCWA had pursued its cooperation with regional and international organizations and other United Nations bodies in the implementation of its work programme. The most significant coordination mechanism was the regional inter-agency coordinating group established in April 1995.

With regard to the major international conferences, ESCWA had focused on follow-up activities relating to the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development, the Copenhagen Declaration on Social Development adopted at the World Summit for Social Development and the Fourth World Conference on Women. It had also participated in the United Nations Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat II).

During the period under review, ESCWA had responded to a broad range of the region's needs in the economic and social sectors, within the framework of subprogrammes on management of natural resources and the environment, improvement of the quality of life, economic development and cooperation, regional development and global changes, and special issues. Technical assistance was provided through regional advisory services in the fields of agriculture, data processing, energy, environment, industry, national accounts, social development, transport, water resources and issues relating to the World Trade Organization.

Participation in a number of regional meetings held under United Nations and other auspices, had enabled the Commission to start playing, as a regional partner, a renewed socio-economic role closely linked to the Middle East peace process. ESCWA was well equipped and eager to play its part as a key partner in efforts to reshape the future of the region.

The meeting rose at 5.10 p.m.